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SUBJECT: OMANI GOVERNMENT REACTS STRONGLY TO SUGGESTION OF PATRIOT OFFER

CLASSIFIED BY: Richard Schmierer, Ambassador, Department of State, Embassy Muscat; REASON: 1.4(A), (B), (D)

11. (C) Summary: A recent New York Time's (NYT) article describing Patriot missile deployment to countries in the Gulf in order to counter Iran, assuage Israel, and reassure our Gulf partners has been disquieting to the Omani Government. There has never been an official USG offer of Patriots to Oman, due in large part to the GoO's rejection of any undertaking that might include or would imply the presence of Patriot missiles here. Oman's close partnership with the USG, particularly through the Base Access Agreement (BAA), is contingent on maintaining an extremely low profile and continuing the Sultanate's foreign policy objective of carefully balancing public perception of its relationships with the U.S. and Iran. Press of this sort, however unintended, makes it extremely difficult for Oman to maintain that balance. End Summary.

Press Articles on Missile Defense in the Gulf

12. (U) A NYT article appeared on January 30 titled "U.S. Speeding Up Missile Defenses in Persian Gulf," which quoted General Petraeus as saying that Patriot missile batteries would be located in four gulf countries, and noted that Saudi Arabia already has Patriots. An unnamed military official named the countries as Qatar, the UAE, Bahrain and Kuwait. The version of this article syndicated by the NYT news service includes the sentence "Oman, which has always been sensitive about perceptions that it is doing U.S. bidding, has also been approached, but there is no deployment of Patriots there, according to U.S. officials." (Note: That sentence does not/not appear in the version currently available via the NYT website, and it is unclear to post if it appeared in the print edition on January 31; the syndicated version of the article is otherwise not substantially different from the NYT original. End Note). The item was picked up by regional press on January 31, quoting the NYT article and specifically noting that "Oman has declined the offer." On February 2, the private English daily "Times of Oman" carried a front page article titled "Missile Shield: Oman denies receiving any offer from US." In it, Sayyid Badr al Busaidi, Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), is quoted as saying, "the Sultanate's position on such matters is firm and that it does not ... enter into alliances or axis (sic) against any state." He stressed that Oman "does not allow its territory to be used to carry out any military operations against any country in the region."

Oman is not Interested

¶3. (C) The Embassy has no record of a formal offer of Patriot missiles made to Oman by the USG. However, a number of discussions have occurred in which USG intent was to gauge Omani interest in collective missile defense capability. Oman has consistently shown a lack of interest and has politely declined to engage in substantive discussions on "shared early warning" systems, "integrated air defense," or "collective defense." (Note: This is likely due to its assessment that Iran does not pose an imminent threat, its desire to not needlessly antagonize Iran, and its distrust of fellow GCC members, making it unwilling to share data within that group. End Note.) Further, in official correspondence, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) rejected an offer for a "Missile and Air Defence Working Group" on February 6, 2009; rejected further offers for an "Air and Missile Defense Shared Early Warning (SEW) System" on March 30, 2009, citing Oman's "unwillingness to commit itself to a SEW"; and on July 22, 2009 again rejected any participation in the "Air Defense Missiles Advanced Warning System" project.

Direct Omani Reaction

¶4. (C) The Omani Royal Office made contact with the Embassy on February 2 to express strong concern about the article and its repercussions, as that office had just received a pointed inquiry from the Sultan on this matter. In a follow-up discussion embassy officer provided the history of discussions on the issue, of which the Royal Office was previously unaware, due to what was described

as a "lack of lateral coordination within the GoO."

¶5. (C) Comment: The strength of Oman's immediate reaction, and the level at which it transpired, is reflective of the tremendous seriousness with which this matter is viewed by the GoO. It is likely that one of the goals of Badr's media statement was to protect the U.S./Omani relationship, as any belief that the U.S. would attempt to utilize Omani territory in this way could potentially cause a public backlash that would jeopardize other aspects of our relationship. The deployment of Patriots to Oman, especially with the goal of countering the Iran threat, would run completely counter to Oman's publicly-stated foreign-policy objectives. Although they do not find the threat imminent, Iran is Oman's number one strategic threat; however, the GoO fundamentally believes the threat can be mitigated through careful management of the relationship. Therefore, the GoO works very deliberately to create a public perception of balance in its relationships with the U.S. and Iran. Oman's security strategy of keeping a low public profile in general has been threatened by the attention brought by the NYT article, and the GoO is working to manage the message for the public. End Comment.

Schmierer